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ABSTRACT

A course for older learners in practical applications of basic interpersonal communication techniques is proposed in this paper. Following a review of the current status of lifelong learning programs, the discussion shifts to a two-part outline of a course designed to train older students in effectively solving both personal and social problems. The first part presents a sequence of techniques for solving interpersonal problems and disagreements on a one-to-one basis. The second part focuses on small group information sharing and problem solving procedures, moving sequentially from problem analysis to causal inquiry to solution advocacy. (RL)

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ARTICLE TITLE: Back to a Basic in Lifelong Learning: Personal and Small Group Problem Solving

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ABSTRACT: This paper proposes a course for older learners in practical applications of basic interpersonal communication techniques. Following a review of the current status of lifelong learning programs, the author outlines a course which would teach first a sequence of techniques for solving interpersonal problems and disagreements on a one-to-one basis. The course would then proceed to small group information sharing and problem solving procedures, moving sequentially from problem analysis to causal inquiry to solution advocacy.

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Back to a Basic in Lifelong Learning:

Personal and Small Group Problem Solving

I am a relative newcomer to the ranks of both the elderly and those professional educators who are committed to assisting our over 55 aged citizens develop, hone, or expand upon their communicative skills. Consequently, it seems important and relevant that I preface my suggestions for a basic communication course for older learners with a summary of the perceptions and perspectives I bring to the field.

First, about whom and of how many do we speak when we discuss lifelong learning and/or education of the older learner? If we are to define the potential "market" for this segment of higher education, the most commonly cited minimum age appears to be 55. Carmichael has suggested a convenient frame of reference by referring to four sub-populations: "the aging (55-64), young-old (65-72), middle-old (73-79), and old-old (80+) . . . ."[1] He suggested that there are literally millions of Americans in each category, with at least 30 million aged 60 or older.[2]

Educators who have developed lifelong learning perspectives must constantly labor to correct popular misconceptions. One such popular error is the belief that the majority of these 30 to 40 million persons are homebound or in nursing homes. Carmichael helped counter this claim by determining that only 5% of those over 65 are currently in nursing homes.[3] The vast majority of older Americans, he concluded, live in private homes and many have reasonable mobility.

Possibly the most positive non-statistical approach to describing the population for whom lifelong learning is to be designed is to note that they

represent perhaps the only minority group of which each of us hopes to become a long term member. In terms of the course proposed in this paper, it is designed for all sub-populations of the elderly and is amenable to presentation on campuses or at community centers.

Second, what do we mean by lifelong learning? Marcus has suggested that lifelong learning is concerned with "the formation and transformation of values throughout a lifetime."[4] Relating specifically to the elderly, Marcus added, "Sometimes it is sparked by personal experiences and may be part of the intrinsic value of acquiring knowledge for its own sake."[5] Schuetz agreed that lifelong learning differs from tradional programs "by emphasizing learning for the sake of learning."[6] Former Vice President Walter Mondale was more specific when he called this aspect of learning a process in which the person "learns to express himself, to communicate, and to question the world through his various experiences."[7] Thus, it would appear reasonable to suggest that a course in the basics of communication would fit within the aegis of lifelong learning.

A third question this author must ask to make certain that he is on common ground with educators in this area concerns reasons for our apparently new found interest in life long learning. It is obvious, perhaps, that as professional educators and as concerned citizens, we should be aware of and desirous of satisfying the educational desires and needs of any segment of our citizenry. A more pointed rationale was provided, however, by the Older Americans Act, passed in 1965 and revised in 1978. This act included a series of objectives for older Americans which, taken together, are often referred to as "aging's Magna Carta." Included in these objectives are "the best possible

physical and mental health," "pursuit of meaningful activity within the widest range of civic, cultural, and recreational opportunities," and "freedom, independence, and the free exercise of individual initiative in planning and managing one's life."[8] Pursuit of objectives such as these is facilitated by, in fact may be well nigh impossible without "learning for learning's sake."

In stressing his commitment to lifelong learning, Mondale asserted that "we can not expect an education concluded at age 18 or 21 to be still adequate . . . for the elderly."[9] He also insisted that we need programs in this area of learning because they benefit not just our elderly, but our nation and our society. He said "One important way we can continue to cultivate our heritage as a great democracy and preserver of freedom is by revitalizing the educational enterprise to make it relevant to all citizens throughout their lives."[10]

Another reason for lifelong learning programs is to short circuit the myth that we are supposed to deteriorate or stagnate at a certain age. This sort of thinking is especially damaging because it tends to become self-fulfilling in the sense that when the elderly expect mental stagnation, it is likely to occur. As Carmichael asked, "Have we been programmed to see old age as dysfunctional, useless, ugly, generally negative? . . . Does the importance of youth as a value in our society cause us to devalue ourselves in old age?"[11]

Educational experts agree that the best way to head off that self fulfilling prophecy is through education. Henri Nouwen has urged that "every man and woman should consider aging a unique opportunity for enriching their own lives."[12] Jessup agreed in opining that "Education is essential for every person in every cycle of life and discontinuance of education is like mental amputation." He added that such mental amputation is inevitable for the older

learner "unless he continues to learn; only then can he make the most of himself."[13] John Sawhill added his support, stating "Perhaps most deeply, adults are, or can be, influenced by the widespread feeling that one is never too old to learn."[14]

Stephen Bailey may best have summarized these arguments for lifelong learning when he noted that Seneca said "old age and happiness are frequently strangers" but that estrangement is not inevitable, "as a wide variety of education endeavors could still materially dispel some of that gloom."[15] Bailey continued, "The instrumental purpose in such education should not be to obliterate all trauma associated with growing old. It should be to maximize for an appreciable and growing percentage of elderly the chance that they will reflect the hoary Chinese in Yeats's "Lapiz Lazuli":

> "Their eyes, mid many wrinkles, their eyes,
> Their ancient glittering eyes are gay."[16]

My fourth and final question concerns content of lifelong learning. First and foremost, it must be quality education. Sawhill quoted an older learner who insisted that he and his peers did not want". . . the educational equivalent of baby food - - mashed, strained, predigested courses especially designed for 'mature' students." As Sawhill responded, ". . . we need to assure a first class experience" for older learners.[17] Also, such quality programs should encourage interaction between ages and degrees of experience. Mondale urged that "The stimulation and creativity that arise from contacts between generations are a priceless commodity we can not afford to squander as individuals or as a society. I can think of no better way to encourage such contact than to enhance the opportunities for an active interchange through education."[18]

More specifically and relevantly to our interests, should education for older students include communication training, and if so, what aspects are most essential, or promise the greatest benefit? Old age is not unique in its facing crises and problems, but as Schuetz asserted, "These persons face 'new' crises . . . resulting from the death of loved ones, losses of health and physical strength, or displacement from homes and familiar environments. These crises involve changes in self-concept, roles, and problem solving strategies."[19] In other words, the elderly have, through their years, solved many problems, but these uniquely aging types of problems must be faced by people who often do not have the experience or skills needed to handle them. A popular theory regarding these aging problems is labeled "disengagement." This theory assumes that older persons consciously or at least subconsciously reduce their emotional commitment or involvement with associates because of an awareness that they must change their social and/or economic roles.[20]

Authorities agree that these changes through which the elderly find themselves going relate directly to communication and that solving these problems is facilitated by developing skills in problem solving communication. Carmichael suggested "Disengagement theory . . . should actually be considered an interpersonal communication theory."[21] Josephs was even more specific when she advised that the skills which should be made available to all older adults include: "values clarification, decision-making, problem solving, group interaction, and critical thinking or analysis."[22]

One of the specific communication skills most needed by the elderly is, therefore, problem solving. Schuetz suggested, "Problem solving sessions are

valuable in giving older persons an opportunity to talk about the issues that are important to them. Problem solving strategies are . . . needed . . . so they can more effectively cope with new needs and new environments."[23] Field has found that problem solving is a way of assisting older adults in finding "answers to the many questions which have been troubling them for a long time." She also observed that older learners appreciated "the opportunity for significant conversation" rather than conversational chit-chat.[24]

Based on these perspectives regarding the who, what, why and how of life - long learning, the purpose of the balance of this paper is to propose, as a basic or fundamental component of any lifelong learning program, a course designed to train students to effectively solve both personal and social problems. The course would be entitled "Personal and Small Group Problem Solving."

COURSE OUTLINE

As the title suggests, this proposed course would strive to develop skills in two distinct but obviously related areas: personal/interpersonal problem solving and small group problem solving/decision making. Parameters such as time, setting, class size, and self-perceived student needs would determine particular emphases and degree of detail, but it is proposed herein simply to provide the listener/reader with an outline of potential course components which they may need as a starting point or frame of reference for their own course planning. Some instructors no doubt will plan to involve their students in fleshing out the outline and putting meat on the bones.

The personal/interpersonal thrust ought first to consider primary causes and the potential consequences of communication breakdowns. This discussion

probably would explore factors such as out-dated or distorted self-concepts, barrier building styles of emotional expression, defensiveness and the behaviors which spawn it, inability or unwillingness to allow for individual differences in perceptual skills, ineffective listening, one-word, one-meaning approaches to encoding-decoding, and insensitivity to non-verbal communication. The other sides of those coins, the skills which would be introduced and practiced toward the end of enhancing interpersonal relationships might include analysis and sharpening of self-concept, development of bridge building techniques for handling emotions, learning to employ defensiveness-minimizing behaviors such as tentativeness and empathy, developing techniques for bridging perception gaps, becoming skilled at active listening, understanding the significance of the axiom regarding meanings being in people, and developing a sensitivity to the importance of non-verbal communication. Should the instructor and/or students feel the need for textbook guidance in these areas, the number of available texts in interpersonal communication is legion. One which will be recommended by the instructor of this course is Looking Out Looking In, by Adler and Towne.[25]

However much or little detail your circumstances would dictate that you devote to these introductory topics, which obviously are featured in most beginning interpersonal communication courses, all courses such as herein proposed should certainly include guidance and practice in no-lose techniques of person to person conflict resolution. The sequential approach suggested here is based on the work of George Bach and Thomas Gordon, as outlined in Adler and Towne.[26] While those authors recommend careful adherence to a sequence of eight to twelve steps, it seems appropriate here to suggest those steps which are the minimum essentials. Your adaptation should at least

include:

1. Personal identification and analysis of the problem in terms of your own unmet needs.

2. Description of those unmet needs to your partner in terms of non-judgmental "I" language.

3. Soliciting in turn your partner's feelings and unmet needs regarding the situation, always employing active listening on the part of both to insure mutual understanding.

4. Considering together all possible solutions or means to the ends toward which you have agreed to work.

5. Selecting a solution which seems likely to leave neither interactant feeling he is a "loser."

6. Implementing the chosen solution and setting a definite checkup or followup session to evaluate progress.

The extent of explanation, amplification, and sequential practice needed will of course vary with student and situation.

There seems little doubt that any communication course designed for older learners must teach the skills needed to handle interpersonal problems, but equally essential is a focus on society's problems and small group techniques for solving them. While the elderly have numerous interpersonal problems which are peculiar to their age group, often involving desires to retain control over their lives, activities, decision making, mobility, etc., they are equally interested in and well suited for discussion of and solution-seeking for society's many problems.

Schuetz discovered that the elderly consider a number of society's problems significant to them - - disintegration of family, rising cost of living and inflation rates, breakdown of religious values, television and street violence, crime and punishment, terrorism, problems of public education, etc.[27] She also observed that the "older learners seemed better informed than undergrads -- the elderly are well read and follow news programming closely."[28]

Carmichael reported a TV viewing survey which revealed that "with the single exception of the Lawrence Welk show, the elderly subjects preferred news and public affairs programs."[29] Furthermore, Bunting reported the older learner has been found to "surpass young learners in verbal and integrating ability."[30]

It therefore seems reasonable to suggest that interest in and knowledge of society's problems already exists and that as class participants, older learners would welcome the opportunity to discuss current issues and, in the process, move beyond simple "doom and gloom" problem pointing to development of skills in problem analysis and solving.

Such a unit should be subdivided into consideration of problem analysis, causal analysis and solution evaluation and advocacy. Problem analysis would first consider the values and benefits of problem solving, historically and to contemporary society. Attention then would focus on criteria for determining the existence of a problem and its appropriateness and susceptibility to small group consideration. Finally, we would look at approaches to measuring the seriousness and immediacy of the problem for particular audiences or groups or age segments of society.

Once problems are identified and analyzed in terms of existence, persistence and seriousness, and appropriateness to class and small group consideration, attention should shift to the advisability of attacking only the symptoms of a problem area, or searching out and attacking causes. It will be important that students understand that while causal attack normally is preferable, it is not always possible or practical. Some groups might benefit from study of methods of identifying and proving causation, possibly including Mill's canons of causation and various analytic techniques such as establishing

a chain of causes or narrowing from multiple causes to those causal factors which are most susceptible to treatment or elimination.[31] At any rate, some attention would have to be focussed on the concept of causation.

The course would then move to consideration of all solutions which could conceivably attack causes or relieve symptoms which have been identified by the group. Learners would be encouraged to establish what seemed reasonable, defensible criteria for acceptable solutions; then to evaluate all possible solutions produced by earlier brainstorming, in terms of these agreed upon criteria; then to select what appears to be the most practical, desirable solution; and then to discuss the steps necessary for implementation and testing of the choice. Because this implementation process often necessitates advocacy of the chosen solution in order to gain its general acceptance, practice could be provided in supporting a solution by methods of explanation, analogy, and use of authoritative testimony. This phase also lends itself very readily to use of various debating formats.

This type of unit obviously would need to be adapted to individual and group needs, interests, backgrounds and experience. In some settings, instructors might find it advisable to practice the basic techniques on a class or fairly large group basis and then, after some consideration of small group dynamics, proceed to practice sessions with groups of five to seven discussants. Again, numerous texts are available which focus on group problem solving and decision making. The instructor of the course described herein will use Group Discussion and Decision Making by Hasling.[32]

SUMMARY

Admittedly the material suggested here could be structured into two or more courses, but the skills embodied herein are basic to communicative effectiveness for the older learner. Such a course or courses would certainly help older learners meet those three goals elucidated in the Aging Magna Carta: "the best possible physical and mental health," "pursuit of meaningful activity within the widest range of civic, cultural, and recreational opportunities," and "freedom, independence, and the free exercise of individual initiative in planning and managing one's life." Ultimately Yeats's poetic prediction might thereby be realized for these older learners and "their eyes, their ancient glittering eyes"[33] will be gay.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Carl W. Carmichael, "Communication and Gerontology: Interfacing Disciplines," Western Speech Communication (Spring 1976), 125.

[2]Ibid., p. 121.

[3]Ibid., p. 129.

[4]Lotte Marcus, "Ageing and Education," in David Hobman, ed., The Social Challenge of Ageing (London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1978), p. 128.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Janice Schuetz, "Lifelong Learning: Communication Education for the Elderly," Communication Education (Jan. 1980), 33.

[7]"Report of UNESCO International Commission on the Development of Education" in Walter F. Mondale, "The Next Step: Lifelong Learning," Change (Oct. 1976), 43.

[8]"The Older Americans Act," Modern Maturity (Feb.-Mar. 1981), 33.

[9]Mondale, 44.

[10]Ibid, p. 43.

[11]Carmichael, 122.

[12]Henri Nouwen,Aging (New York: Doubleday, 1974), p. 154.

[13]F. W. Jessup, Lifelong Learning (London: Pergamon, 1969), p. 25.

[14]John C. Sawhill, "Lifelong Learning: Scandal of the Next Decade?" Change (December-January, 1978-79), 7.

[15]Stephen K. Bailey, "The Several Ages of Learning," Change (May 1976), 39.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Sawhill, 80.

[18]Mondale, 43.

[19]Schuetz, 35.

[20]Ibid.

[21]Carmichael, 123.

[22]Mary J. Josephs, "Adapting Institutions to the Adult Learner: Experiments in Progress," in Current Issues in Higher Education (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1978), p. 12.

[23]Schuetz, 38, 36.

[24]Minna Field, The Aged, The Family and the Community (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), p. 178.

[25]Ron Adler and Neil Towne, Looking Out/Looking In (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981).

[26]Ibid., pp. 354-367.

[27]Schuetz, 39.

[28]Ibid.

[29]Carmichael, 125.

[30]Charles I. Bunting, "The Federal Lifelong Learning Project," in Current Issues in Higher Education (Washington, D.C.: American Association for Higher Education, 1978), p. 4.

[31]Otis M. Walter and Robert L. Scott, Thinking and Speaking: A Guide to Intelligent Oral Communication, 3rd ed., (New York: Macmillan, 1973), pp. 180-197.

[32]John Hasling, Group Discussion and Decision Making (New York: Crowell, 1975).

[33]Bailey, 39.